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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 GUANGZHOU 000647

SIPDIS

E.O. 12958, DECL: 11/23/2034  
TAGS: [PHUM](#) [KIRF](#) [SOCI](#) [ELAB](#) [CH](#)  
SUBJECT: Chinese Protestant Christians Discuss Finding Religion

REF: Guangzhou 635

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(U) Classified by Consul General Brian L. Goldbeck for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

11. (C) Summary: Pastors at the state-approved Three-Self Patriotic Movement Protestant Zhongshan Road Church in Nanning, Guangxi, say they have more freedom to minister to their flocks but still must avoid discussing sensitive topics. The Zhongshan Road Church takes pride in its professionally trained clergy and has strict requirements for potential converts wishing to be baptized. Church leaders and members told the Consul General and ConGenOffs November 5 that their first contact with religion generally was via family and friends, with some saying that personal miracles played a pivotal role in their conversion. The current church building is inadequate to deal with the sizable congregation; plans are in the works to construct a new building with donated funds. End summary.

Staying inside the Lines  
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12. (C) Even with greater freedom to minister to their flocks, pastors still must self-censor at the pulpit to avoid drawing government ire, according to leaders (protect) of Nanning's government-approved Three-Self Patriotic Movement (TSPM) Protestant Zhongshan Road Church. Claiming improvements in recent years from a religious freedom standpoint, the pastor responsible for running the branch's Sunday School classes said that such a program would have been "impossible" five years ago. Moreover, he said, some of the children would have the opportunity to attend a religious-themed summer camp next year. Guangxi Christian Association senior executive Xiao Jifu claimed that there was "no government interference" in the way the church operated, but did say that he and the other local church leaders made a particular effort to stay away from politics and "avoid any topics that could ignite contradictions" among the people. (Comment: The unenthusiastic welcome given to the Guangxi Government handler accompanying us and the extensive note taking by the handler during our meeting - especially when members were sharing details of their personal lives -- suggested an uneasy relationship between the local church leaders and government officials. End comment.)

13. (C) All of the Zhongshan Road Church's senior administrators have received formal training at Chinese seminaries. They noted that, although in the past only a seminary in Nanjing was available for the training of pastors, they now have the option to attend in Wuhan, as well, which they called an improvement. One of the leaders emphasized that weekend services included formal Bible-based sermons prepared and given by the pastors. (Comment: The point about the formality of the sermons might have been a snub aimed at house churches and other non-state-sanctioned Christian religious gatherings, the leadership of which often has not received formal religious training. End comment.)

14. (C) Baptisms are performed only twice annually, in June and November. Before baptism, all candidates are required to complete a three-month course of preparatory instruction, which includes lessons in the church's basic doctrine and beliefs. Individuals who do not complete the course may not be baptized, said Xiao. TSPM protestant church membership reflects local demographics and does not appeal any more or less to specific nationality or ethnic groups, according to Xiao. Church attendance by age, too, is unremarkable; approximately one-third of members are under 40, one-third in their 40s and 50s with the balance over 60. The Zhongshan Road location had namecards for 39 children attending Sunday School. Total attendance at the church generally reaches approximately 900 people. Xiao said that several government functionaries were low-key members of the

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congregation. Since 2008 the church has held three gatherings each week, taking place on both Saturdays and Sundays. The Zhongshan Road Church and its sister branch established in 1995 at Gonghe Road together serve the official religious needs of the estimated 10,000 Christians in Nanning.

#### Miracles and Word-of-mouth

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15. (C) A number of church members and leaders shared their experiences with finding religion, with a common theme being that almost all had had to seek out religion on their own. With formal proselytism banned in China, the individuals characterized their introduction to Protestant Christianity as coming from family, friends and even serendipity. While Xiao had Christian parents who passed along their beliefs, his wife said that her mother and grandmother regularly attended church without her knowledge until one day she secretly followed them and began regular attendance. A young woman who currently works with the Zhongshan Road Church's youth group and who is the only Christian in her family said she first heard about religion from her boyfriend and began volunteering at the church on weekends before starting full-time work there. Another woman heavily involved with church administration said that, as a 17 year old, nobody around her ever spoke of religion, but she noticed that her hometown's Christian church was a busy place and ultimately was converted after deciding herself to find out more. Before she met him, her husband learned about Christianity from a friend and later cultivated his faith while working for several years in the United States.

16. (C) Several church members cited miraculous personal occurrences as a turning point in their faith. One woman said that her belief had begun in 1982 when her father was dying. With doctors pessimistic about the father's chances for survival, the woman said her mother spent

three days seeking out a pastor purported to have healing powers. Following a day of preaching, praying and teaching by the pastor at the family's residence, the woman's father -- who, she said, had not walked for years or eaten for days -- reportedly regained his strength, became ambulatory and went on to live another 18 years. The experience had such an impact on the woman that, even as a middle-school student at the time, she had wanted to drop out of school to become a missionary.

#### A New Building in the Future

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17. (C) The Zhongshan Road Church's current home is only the latest of several edifices built or rebuilt since its foundation in 1906 by a British missionary-doctor. Though the current church building will remain as a historic site, the Nanning Government intends to relocate the congregation to a planned, centralized location in the future, according to Xiao. Xiao said that the proposed new church building would include a planned "Christian square" public area and would serve as the focal point of Nanning's Christian community. Xiao said the church had already raised RMB 3 million (about US\$440,000) for the new structure, with a goal of raising one million more. According to Xiao, most of the money has come from donations by church members. Though none of the money so far has originated from outside China, Xiao said he would welcome financial help from U.S. churches.

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